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ABSTRACT

After a review of the literature on teenage sexual behavior and contraceptive practice and their consequences, this paper presents a brief description of a research project on mother-daughter communication patterns, which is intended to investigate the influence of female parents on the sexual and contraceptive behavior of teenage daughters. It also examines patterns of communication about sex roles and sexual behavior between mothers and daughters. The model for the study looks at family structural variables attitudinal congruence between mother and daughter. The sample consists of 400 15-year old unmarried women and their mothers. This research is expected to add to the understanding of sexual and contraceptive knowledge of young women, and might suggest appropriate intervention strategies. (Author/LPB)

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MOTHER-DAUGHTER COMMUNICATION PATTERNS RE SEXUALITY

Greer Litton Fox*

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Mother-Daughter Communication Patterns Re Sexuality

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The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief description of a research project on mother-daughter communication patterns which will begin this fall at the Merrill-Palmer Institute. The project is being supported with a research grant from The Center for Population Research of the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development.

As the title suggests, the focus of the project is on the mother-daughter relationship. Despite the fact that mothers are felt to be the major socializing influence on daughters as the daughters take on more fully adult female roles and despite the fact that conception, gestation, and birth are physical experiences that provide a universal experiential link among women, most especially among the women of one familial unit, surprisingly little is known about the part that mothers play in the transmission of sexual information to their daughters. The goal of this project is to investigate the influence of female parents on the sexual and contraceptive behavior of teenage daughters. The strategy for so doing will be to examine patterns of communication about sex roles and sexual behavior between mothers and daughters in different types of families and to measure the impact of varying communication patterns on the sexual and contraceptive knowledge and behavior of daughters.

The research context of this study is formed by the growing body of literature on teenage sexual behavior and contraceptive practice and their consequences. The major descriptive work on teenage sexual activity has been provided by Kantner and Zelnik's 1971 study of 15-19 year old women and their 1976 replication (see for example, Kantner and Zelnik, 1972, 1973; Zelnik and Kantner, 1972, 1973, 1977). In comparing data from 1971 and 1976, they observe that there has been a 30 percent increase in the prevalence of sexual intercourse (from 27 percent to 35 percent). Although the largest proportion of sexually experienced young women are found at older ages, the largest increases in sexual activity are found among teens at ages below 16 years (see also Baldwin, 1976). Moreover, while there is evidence of convergence by race, Kantner and Zelnik continue to find a higher prevalence of premarital intercourse among black than among white young women (1977). Data on other aspects of teenage sexual behavior indicate that sexual intercourse occurs relatively infrequently, sporadically, and for most young women tends to be confined to a single partner (Zelnik and Kantner, 1972, 1973, 1977; for similar findings, see Akpom, Akpom, and Davis, 1976; Fox, 1976a, 1976b; and Vener and Stewart, 1974).

Zelnik and Kantner's (1977) recent replication indicates that sexually active young people are becoming better contraceptors. Nevertheless, the literature on contraceptive attitudes and behavior of young people yields three rather unsettling conclusions. First, positive attitudes toward contraception do not seem to be matched by effective contraceptive behavior. Second, the majority of the sexually active young appear to be unlikely to use contraception regularly. Third, among very young teenage girls, there is heavier reliance on male methods than on the pill or IUD. In light of the increasingly widespread nature of sexual activity among unmarried youth, the relative lack of regular, effective contraceptive use, and the measurable rise in premarital conceptions, more detailed understanding of factors influencing teenage sexual and contraceptive behavior would be desirable.

Given the importance of same-sex and cross-sex parent-child relationships for socialization in general and sex-role socialization in particular (Lipman-Blumen, 1972), it is surprising that we know as little as we do about parent-child transmission structures for the flow of information and values relative to sex, sexual permissiveness, contraception, and so forth. Most of what our literature suggests is that parents and children do not communicate directly or positively about such matters (Bell and Buerkle, 1961; Dubbe, 1965; Kirkendall and Cox, 1967; Lindemann, 1974). Indeed, some go so far as to claim, without evident data in support of such a claim, that parents and children cannot communicate about sexuality within a familial context (Mace, 1962).

At the same time there is evidence to suggest that such parental and familial characteristics as socio-economic status, family composition and work-status of the mother do distinguish among daughters in terms of their sexual and contraceptive behavior. Kantner and Zelnik (1972) find that, in general, for both blacks and whites there is an inverse association between parental SES and daughter sexual experience. An exception to this relationship is with educational level of the parent or guardian. For black daughters education of the male parent/guardian is inversely associated with sexual experience (the relationship is similar though less marked for the female parent/guardian). Among white daughters the inverse relationship between parental/guardian education and sexual experience holds for neither parent and indeed is reversed when the education of either female or male parent/guardian is at the college level or above. Relative to contraceptive use Kantner and Kelnik (1973) find a positive association with parental SES, with education of the female parent/guardian particularly important in this regard (see also their report in Shah et al 1975).

Family situation, that is, whether the family is father-headed, mother-headed, or headed by someone other than the natural parents, appears to be related to the level of sexual experience both for black and white daughters (Kantner and Zelnik, 1972). Kantner and Zelnik (1972) report that coital experience is lowest among daughters living in households headed by natural fathers. Daughters living in female-headed households, whether or not the female head is the natural mother, generally exhibit the highest rates of sexual experience. Consistent and effective contraception, on the other hand, was not clearly distinguished by family composition (Kantner and Zelnik, 1972), although even here there was some tendency for daughters in female headed households to report never using contraception and failure to use at last intercourse in higher frequencies than daughters from other households.

Since the proposed research is concerned with patterns of mother-daughter communication about sex and contraception, it is of interest that Kantner and Zelnik asked daughters about whether they confided in their parents. They report (Kantner and Zelnik, 1973) that confiding in parents is monotonically and inversely related to coital experience. Moreover, parent-daughter communication seems to have its greatest impact at the younger ages for both blacks and whites. Kantner and Zelnik unfortunately did not show data relating the degree of confiding to type of household or to use of contraception. Akpom et al (1976), however, do report data relevant to this matter from their study of 303 white Michigan teenage clients of a family-planning agency. In terms of sexual behavior they find that daughters of female-headed households are more likely to have initiated coital activity prior to age 15 and are more likely to have had more than one sexual partner by the time they are in attendance at the clinic. Further, the daughters of female heads reported significantly more often than daughters of male heads that they had discussed contraception with parents

(63 percent versus 42 percent); that they felt their parents would understand if the daughters tried to discuss contraception with them (63 percent versus 43 percent); and, of those currently using contraception, that their parents were aware of the daughter's use of contraception (48 percent versus 18 percent). Their findings lead the authors to suggest that communication about contraception appears easier when the household head is female. Such a result would be consistent with Reiss's "autonomy theory of heterosexual permissiveness," which predicts greater permissiveness about sexual matters among those least involved in or tied to a traditional marital and familial form (Reiss and Miller, 1974).

Although he does not break his data down by type of family composition in terms of sex of the household head, Furstenberg (1976) reports on communication about contraception between mothers and daughters in his study of 404 pregnant teens and their mothers in Baltimore. His study sample is predominantly black and 2 of 5 live with the mother only. Close to 60 percent of the mothers interviewed reported that they had frequently attempted to talk to their daughters about sex, and nearly all (92 percent) reported discussing sex occasionally with their daughters. Birth control was said to have been discussed by 61 percent of the mothers and 45 percent of the daughters. Though Furstenberg questions the accuracy and directness of the information transmitted by mothers to daughters, nevertheless he finds that even limited instruction had an impact on the daughter's use of contraception. In families in which birth control was discussed, 52 percent of the daughters had used contraception at some time compared to 23 percent when birth control had never been discussed by mothers and daughters. Furstenberg points out that the mother-daughter discussion of birth control is important not solely in terms of information imparted (the mothers themselves were often poorly informed) but also, and perhaps more significantly, because such discussion could make explicit the daughter's sexual behavior and could encourage the daughter's awareness and acceptance of her own sexuality. As studies cited earlier have suggested, acceptance of one's sexuality is often a prelude to taking contraceptive responsibility for oneself.

Work-status of the female parent has been infrequently investigated for its relation to the daughter's sexual and contraceptive behavior. In a comparison of pregnant teens with their nonpregnant classmates in his Baltimore study, Furstenberg (1976) finds that mothers of the nonpregnant teens are slightly more likely to be in the labor force than mothers of the pregnant teens (66 percent versus 60 percent). In unreported data from my own study of women students at a midwestern university, daughters of mothers working outside the home were more likely to be sexually experienced that daughters of mothers who did not work outside the home (62 percent versus 54 percent), and the former were more likely than the latter to have used a contraceptive at their most recent coital episode (64 percent versus 50 percent). Without more information about the conditions under which mothers worked outside the home, their occupational status, or their contributions to family income, as well as more information from a larger pool of studies, it is difficult to interpret the meaning of the relationship between the mother's work status and the daughter's sexual and contraceptive behavior. But the basic point, that parental characteristics do differentiate among daughters in terms of the latter's sexual and contraceptive behavior, still holds.

A different order of studies suggests that parental attitudes about sexuality do vary and that the differences among parents are reflected in the orientation children can have toward sexuality. For example, Gill (1970) documents the influence of parental attitudes on children's reactions to ambiguous sexual stimuli. Libby (1971) finds that parents' acceptance or rejection of content of sex education courses for children varies according to the parents' degree of liberalism re

sexuality. Walsh et al (1976) suggest that parents can be distinguished by sex role ideology in terms of their acceptance of premarital sexual behavior of daughters, such that parents are more permissive about their daughter's behavior when the parents hold a sex-equalitarian ideology. Degree of religiosity in the parental household is reflected in daughters' sexual behavior (Kantner and Zelnik, 1972) and sexual permissiveness (Reiss, 1967).

All of the foregoing studies on parental characteristics provide a rationale for the investigation in the present study of the influence of the mother on the daughter's sexual and contraceptive knowledge and behavior. The analytic model to be tested is presented in Figure 1.

According to the model, family structural variables, such as composition, socio-economic status, and race, are expected to exert a direct influence on both the attitudes of the mother and the communication pattern between mother and daughter. The influence of the mother's attitudes on those of her daughter was felt by definition to be an inferred relationship, one that cannot be measured directly. What is measurable is the degree of attitudinal congruence between mother and daughter, obtainable through derived measures comparing the attitudes of each. The heart of the model is the hypothesis that the degree of attitudinal congruence between mothers and daughters relative to sex roles and sexual behavior will influence their pattern of communication, and that the openness or closedness of their communication will influence the daughter's degree of effective knowledge about and behavior with regard to sex and contraception.

The data for this study will be collected by means of a structured interview survey with 400 fifteen year old, unmarried women and their mothers from the Detroit, Michigan SMSA. The sample will be stratified by race and sex of household head. Sixteen interviewers, eight black and eight white females, will be hired for this project. Interviewers will be assigned to teams of two each, matching respondents by race and insofar as possible, by age. Interviews with the mother and daughter will take place simultaneously, with the mother at home, and with the daughter at the project site.

The dependent variables will consist of these four sets of measures obtained from the daughter: (1) sexual and contraceptive knowledge, (2) sexual and contraceptive behavior, (3) projective measures of likely sexual and contraceptive behavior under certain conditions, and (4) sources of sexual and contraceptive knowledge. The predictor variables will be comprised of these five sets of variables: (1) family structural variables, (2) mother's and (3) daughter's attitudes toward sex roles and sexuality, (4) mother-daughter attitudinal congruence, and (5) mother-daughter communication. The basic strategy for data analysis involves a series of sequential, and sometimes nested, contingency analyses using primarily contingency and correlational techniques. The goal of the data analysis is to build and test multivariate models of daughter's knowledgeableness and behavior.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to the understanding of sexual and contraceptive knowledge of young women. Solutions to the problems of unexpected pregnancy, teenage abortions, unwanted births, and early ages of marriage can be advanced through additional research. There is reason to believe that the parent-child relationship is germane to our understanding of teenage fertility behavior and might suggest appropriate intervention strategies. Beyond the implications for policy intervention, this study will provide comparisons of intergenerational socialization processes by race and family structure in terms of sexual and contraceptive behavior and sex role ideology.

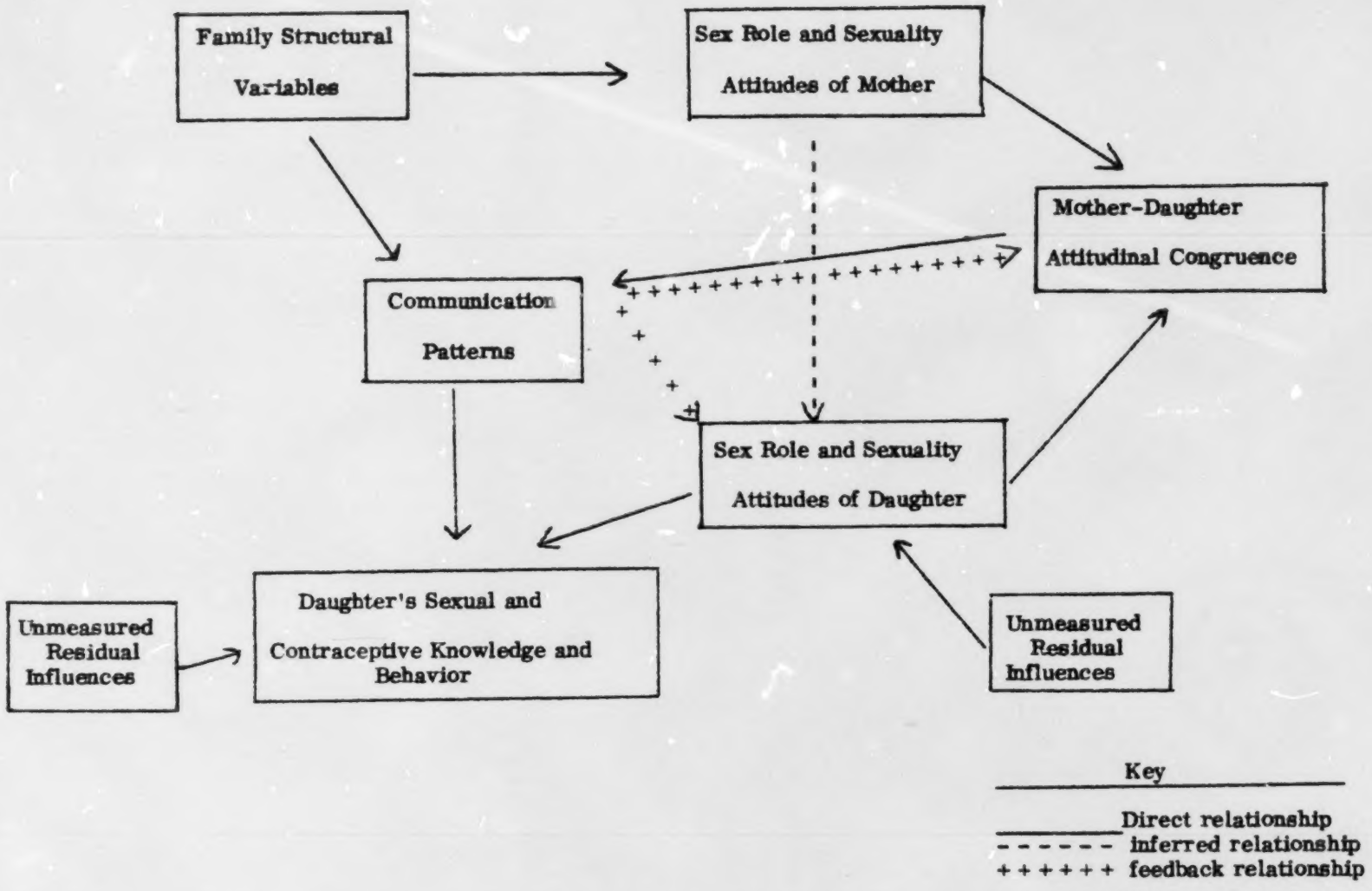

Figure 1. Model of the Impact of Mother-Daughter Communication Patterns on the Sexual and Contraceptive Knowledge and Behavior of Daughters

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